

Whole-of-society approach needed against truth decay

In an age of pervasive information flows, governments do not defeat fake news. It's the people as a society who do. BY EUGENE K B TAN

THE threat of deliberate falsehoods, or more popularly "fake news", poses serious threats to the democratic wellbeing of societies. The marketplace of ideas increasingly suffers from truth decay, propagated online or offline, imperilling an already vulnerable information ecosystem.

In turn, this compromises the functioning of a democracy, which is premised on citizens having a shared reality rather than multiple distorted realities.

Technology has compounded matters. "Deep fakes", the artificial intelligence-powered imitation of speech and images to make someone appear to say or do things he never said or did, can further erode trust in society.

The deft use of algorithms and large data sets to determine who should receive different targeted messages and advertisements means that online falsehoods can be specifically aimed at individuals, depending on their political



A newsstand in midtown Manhattan which aims to educate the public about the dangers of fake news. The newsstand was set up by the Columbia Journalism Review. PHOTO: AFP

views, cognitive biases, and concerns by examining their media consumption and emails.

Ev Williams, Twitter's co-founder, remarked recently: "I thought once everyone could speak freely and exchange information and ideas, the world is automatically going to be a better place... I was wrong about that."

Are we then barreling towards an infopocalypse, the catastrophic failure of the marketplace of ideas? Perhaps not yet, but this should caution us that the proverbial marketplace of ideas and the so-called wisdom of the crowds might not assist societies in arriving at the truth.

Countries have been affected by deliberate attempts to influence public opinion, undermine social cohesion, influence election outcomes, create public panic and incite violence through falsehoods, misrepresentation of facts, trolling and astroturfing.

The threat can transmogrify to a clear and present danger, especially during key national events such as elections, where emotions can run high and public opinion is divided.

Hence, it would be imprudent for any society to underestimate the threat posed by deliberate campaigns to sow falsehoods, often made worse by closed minds, which make knowledge and truth difficult to discern.

However, no society should be unduly alarmed by the putative threat. We need to recognise the threat for what it is, but it must not cripple us. If our way of life is detrimentally impacted, then those who seek to do us harm would have succeeded.

Fake news is not novel; neither are disinformation campaigns. The history of human civilisation is replete with disinformation efforts as political intrigue, statecraft and warfare. But accessible and affordable technology means the impact and reach of fake news is now exponentially greater.

GOING BEYOND LAWS

As there are many types of falsity, the focus of any legislation should be on curbing the spread of false or misleading information resulting from a coordinated effort as matter of statecraft by a foreign entity or for the private purposes of making profits. Such nefarious activities are often directed at affecting our way of life and the trust among people as well as trust in public institutions.

There may be the need to beef up the powers and penalties provided in existing legislation to better handle the evolving threats. However, any legislation must not over-reach as overly broad laws risk stifling the bottom-up energy and mobilisation that is needed to thwart and

keep falsehoods at bay. Judicial oversight is crucial if the authorities are to be vested with significant powers to curb falsehoods in times of crisis.

Another concern with blunt legislation that vests significant powers in the authorities is that the fundamental liberty of freedom of speech and expression may be compromised.

To be clear, the battle against fake news is not a zero-sum game, where in order to triumph over falsehoods, the freedom of speech and expression has to be curtailed. On the contrary, such attempts are counter-productive and smack of cowardly attempts by insecure governments and politicians to curb dissent.

Those who seek to do harm would have succeeded merely by making a society undermine its constitutional freedoms and the societal values that define it. Similarly, the right of free speech must be exercised responsibly.

The freedom of speech and expression, responsibly exercised, is needed even more to ensure that bad speech and falsehoods are decisively exposed for what they are. Any law must thus even-handedly balance the competing interests of protecting the home front while also ensuring the values a society hold dear are not diminished.

The issue of whether media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp when used to propagate falsehoods, should be shielded from legal liability for the actions of third-party users of their services, has to be closely studied. The hard truth is that "falsehood flies, and truth comes limping after", as Jonathan Swift observed in 1710.

If such platforms are shielded from legal liability, their responsiveness to the harms posed by deliberate online falsehood campaigns are likely to be inhibited.

On the other hand, if too onerous a burden is placed, there may be a detrimental impact on the growth of online services and their being an important means of upholding freedom of expression.

Similarly, data privacy and governance must be bolstered. Those with malicious intent can weaponise our own data, which were offered in exchange for "free" services like online searches and social networking.

MULTI-PRONG, MULTI-STAKEHOLDER APPROACH

Governments in various jurisdictions like Germany, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and the UK have attempted or are contemplating a suite of legislative and non-legislative counter-measures against disinformation campaigns.

Yet, there will be the need to defend, bolster and strengthen the home front, including enhancing a society's media and information literacy so that we will not succumb so easily to disinformation. A "whole of society" approach is crucial.

Responsibility has to be shared if disinformation campaigns are to be successfully repelled. A multi-stakeholder approach is vital as a well coordinated and well-timed campaign at propagating falsehoods often leverages on digital technology and platforms for deep and extensive reach.

Society, in short, has to increase its discernment quotient because if laws have to be activated, it may already be too late. This is where educational institutions, libraries and mainstream media have a critical role to play in building society's immunity and resilience so that there is a collective ability to discern what is true or untrue.

People are entitled to their opinions, but not facts. Otherwise, truth, reason and open minds will be endangered and public discourse, politics and governance fall prey to demagoguery, manipulation and autocracy.

Thus, in any multi-pronged effort to combat disinformation, due consideration must be given to boost trusted sources of information such as traditional media, even as they grapple with being profitable and being relevant to their readership and audience, especially the young.

Societies will also need to grow their social resilience because in the event a disinformation campaign succeeds, what matters then is how a society, bounces back from the insidious attempts to harm it.

To triumph against the scourge of disinformation, the imperative is to promote responsible free speech in public discourse, encourage the open-minded exchange of information and ideas and enhance trust and confidence in the democratic process, especially the public institutions. Open knowledge can help realise the democratic imperative of citizens sharing the same reality.

In an age of pervasive information flows, governments do not defeat fake news. It is people who are the bulwark against the insidious forces that seek to divide and destroy.

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These were prepared remarks for the "Open Knowledge vs Fake news" public forum in Wellington, organised by the Victoria University of Wellington and the National Library of New Zealand, Nov 6, 2018.